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ABSTRACT

In its simplest form, what is thought of as community is a group of people coming together on the basis of something shared for the benefit of the community. To imagine this form of community, people must reconstruct it as a memory from a prehistoric time in which they lived in harmony with other people. But as they have not experienced this memory, where does it come from? Jean-Francois Lyotard suggests the knowledge-making power of narratives. He distinguishes between mythic narratives that point back in time to group origins and grand narratives that point forward in time to promised outcomes. Three different myths explain why it seems that community is inevitable. First, the myth of "community as preordained" maintains that communities were preordained for human beings by a transcendental God. Second, the myth of "community as organic" views community as an organic grouping of people, something inevitable and part of the Natural world. Third, the myth of "community as necessary to the survival of the species" invokes Darwinian thinking. It suggests that community is inevitable but it replaces religion and spiritual forces with scientific ones: community is necessary to the survival of the species. All three myths organize themselves around a prime cause or transcendental power. In asserting community's inevitability, people seek to defuse communal actions and evade their consequences. In doing so, they claim a modernist position that rests on universality and progress. As Raymond Williams points out, community is "never to be used unfavorably." (Contains 21 references.) (TB)

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**"Tensions and Paradoxes Inherent in the Idea of Community"**

"[T]he universality invoked by the beautiful and the sublime is merely an Idea of community, for which no proof, that is, no direct presentation, will ever be found, but only indirect presentations" (Lyotard, *The Differend*, 168)

The urge to form communities seems so inherent in the nature of human beings as to go without question. We remember a time when we were more dependent on the people in close proximity to us—for help with harvesting crops, for help with building shelters, for moral and spiritual support. We remember a world that seems more simple, more natural. But what is this we remember?

Walter Benjamin (1968) describes remembering as a "Penelope work of forgetting" where "the day unravels what the night was [sic] woven" (202). Remembering is a dialectic of memory and forgetfulness, what Benjamin calls "a conversion in memory of accumulated and frequently unconscious data" (157), unconscious data that "has been forgotten of the prehistoric world" (131). It is from that prehistoric world beyond memory, I will argue, that our unquestioned urge to community emerges as myth.

In its simplest form, what we think of as community is a group of people coming together on the basis of something shared, for the benefit of the community. To imagine this form of community, we must reconstruct it as a memory from a prehistoric time in which we lived in harmony with other people. But we have not experienced this memory, so where does it come from? It could come from ideas of religion which we remember as goodwill, concern for others, respect for a higher authority, obedience, piety. Unconscious notions of religion and piety woven together with a conscious idea to organize ourselves in groups. But while our urge to community can be understood as an urge to harmony, the piety underpinning this urge not only brings out religious devotion, it also brings out obedience to a transcendental authority. By not questioning what we do when we seek to form communities, we leave in darkness the tensions inherent in the idea of community, tensions that pit systematizing, totalizing, and terrorizing aspects of community alongside its harmonizing and protecting aspects—pointing to places where we can look for explanations as to why we feel uneasy about the idea of community even while embracing it.

A communication model based on community is fraught with tensions as we use it to illustrate communication theory in this late capitalist world. These tensions within the model, reflecting more general social frictions between modernism and postmodernism, have led researchers to suggest revised versions of the community model in what begins to resemble Kuhn's (1970) period of crisis in normal science. But in our attempts to patch up the communication model based on community, we take our urge to community as an unquestioned assumption. We do not examine fundamental issues about what it is that drives our urge to community and what power dynamics are created when we organize ourselves as a community, especially in a world where modernism and postmodernism coexist.

In looking at some of these fundamental issues concerning how the idea of community might have developed and how it functions, I find that Lyotard's (1984, 1992) writings provide a useful framework for understanding both what the idea of community accomplishes and problems that arise from its use. In exploring how knowledge is legitimated, Lyotard describes the knowledge-making power of narratives—thereby providing one approach to understanding the idea of

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community by cutting through the protective descriptions surrounding it to expose its narrative life-support systems[1].

Lyotard (1992) distinguishes between mythic narratives that point back in time to group origins and grand narratives that point forward in time to promised outcomes. Each of these types of narratives serves to legitimate the group's knowledge, but on different bases. The mythic narrative legitimates knowledge based on the group's ability to name a world in which these names achieve a permanence through repetition of the myth. On the other hand, grand narrative legitimates knowledge based on the group's ability to forecast an outcome for the group. The ordering power of this type of narrative comes from the universal inclusiveness of the forecasted outcome. Lyotard (1992) finds a particular grand narrative—that of emancipation for all—underlying modernism and promising progress to a future wherein all people will become part of a community living the Idea of freedom.

Unfortunately, I do not have time today to explore how the grand narrative of emancipation can be seen working within the idea of community. But I would like to look at how mythic narratives of origin can illuminate our understanding of the seeming inevitability of community. I will suggest three possible myths that could form a basis for our belief in the idea of community. They are community as preordained, community as organic, and community as necessary to the survival of the species. In articulating these myths, I am not putting them forward as an exhaustive list of beliefs upon which we found our notions of community. Instead, I am attempting to unravel some possible underlying assumptions about what communities are and how they function.

**Community as preordained**. Our current notions of community are built on a stratified foundation of preceding ideas—ideas which came before in time but never disappeared nor were totally replaced by later ideas. In the bedrock of our present idea of community we can find one of the possible myths of origin that survives in our memory of community as a system builder, as piety. In this version of the myth of origin, communities are preordained for humans by a transcendental God. The fact that we remember this idea of an inevitable, harmonious community bears witness to this memory's eternal, religious nature. Applied to our idea of community, this memory impels us to find harmony in communal understanding. This memory finds community a transcendental imperative.

The myth of community as preordained can be seen as stemming from an urge to maintain a wholeness promised by religious ideas of harmony. It serves to rationalize and legitimate the idea of community by repeating the narrative of harmony—or consensus—and asserting its permanence. The assertion of community functions as myth by creating a communal sense of *we*. Lyotard (1992) argues that as long as we can maintain an identity as *we*, we can retain a sense of unanimity and wholeness, characteristics important to a sense of community. I would further argue that this urge to maintain a sense of wholeness is one of the factors impelling us to seek consensus as a basis of community. But as many people have suggested[2], a community based on consensus can be as coercive as it is harmonious.

In this double-edged nature of the idea of consensus, we see that our notions of consensus—like our notions of community—may hide a threat of exclusion. When we work through this idea of consensus and myth of community as preordained, we find ourselves at a paradox in which the harmony we seek through this metaphor is necessarily accompanied by real or threatened coercion. Hence, one site of apprehension concerning the idea of community.

**Community as organic**. Also captured in the stratified foundation of our idea of community is a myth of community's origins in Nature. In this version of the myth, community is seen as an organic grouping of people, compared to a mechanical or unnatural grouping. For example, societal changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution were often seen as resulting in

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[1] Other methods might also prove explanatory in this search to understand the idea of community. Michel de Certeau's (1984) model of space/strategies and time/tactics might also prove fruitful for more fully explaining other aspects of community which are only suggested by the narrative model used here.

[2] E.g., Cooper and Holzman, 1989; Harris, 1989; Trimbur, 1989; Jarratt, 1991; Petraglia, 1991; Harding, 1991; Mouffe, 1991; Katz, 1992; Herndl, 1993; Miller, 1993.

unnatural living conditions when contrasted to the agrarian life in England prior to industrialization. After industrialization, this agrarian lifestyle was termed "organic" and served as one model for organic community. This myth of community as an organic manifestation of Nature serves many of the same purposes as did the myth of community as preordained. By using Nature in the sense of a "single prime cause" to underpin the idea of community, we have again asserted that community is preordained and inevitable. But the same problems with harmony, consensus, and coercion loom in the background of this model as they did in the previous one. It seems that moving the impetus for community from God to Nature does not relieve the apprehension that a community can be just as potentially silencing as it is potentially empowering.

**Community as necessary to the survival of the species.** Sometime in the mid-19th century, ideas about Nature shifted from Romantic largesse to pre-Darwinian threat, illuminating a rift from which science could emerge as a biological guiding force in the evolution of *homo sapiens*. In this iteration of the myth, community is not obviously preordained, but is necessary for the survival of the species. Instead of placing God or Nature as the impetus of our urge to community, we have humankind itself as the prime reason and biological progress as the goal of communities. Threatened with extinction in our early development, this myth posits that we banded together to hunt, gather, protect, and survive. In this myth of community for survival of the species, we can claim scientific objectivity for the idea of community, placing it outside history as a law of Nature. By asserting that community is a scientific law of Nature, we again assert that it is eternal and unquestionable. Our urge to grant the idea of community a place outside history illuminates the point that this idea functions to perpetuate a modernist project which is in great tension with postmodern sensibilities.

All three myths of the origins of community which I have unraveled here really revolve around the same point—a transcendental power as prime cause. We organize ourselves into communities because it is inevitable. But in asserting this inevitability of community, we are placing our actions outside history, the effects of which Barthes (1972) describes this way: "I rather fear that the final justification of all this Adamism is to give to the immobility of the world the alibi of a 'wisdom' and a 'lyricism' which only make the gestures of man look eternal the better to defuse them" (102). In asserting community's inevitability we seek to defuse our communal actions and evade their consequences. In doing so, we claim a modernist position which rests on universality and progress. We cannot accommodate the ideas that people will remain different, science doesn't necessarily lead to progress, and consensus can become terrorism. Raymond Williams (1976) puts forward what to me is the clearest argument that our idea of community rests on something that we do not want to look at, saying "...unlike all other terms of social organization...[community] seems never to be used unfavourably, and never to be given any positive opposing or distinguishing term" (66). Even a cursory reading of Foucault (1972, 1980) or Lyotard (1988) should raise the alarm that if the opposing term is not used, it has been silenced.

In the community, consensus serves to locate the power base and delimit its spatial boundaries against an external environment. Difference within this community, being placed in a weak position, must use tactical measures to carry out practices not within the consensual norms. This difference can be tolerated by the community as long as it remains in a weak position. If it becomes a threat to the community's consensus, the community's power base must be re-established: difference is named as *we* and silenced through assimilation, is engaged in a pseudodialectical and homogenized, or is exiled from the community. The purity and dominance of the community's power base is restored. This ability of community to purify itself worked as long as the community could delimit its power base strategically. But postmodern fragmentation is at work on the idea of community, breaking the links which connected it to its prehistoric myths of origin in a modernist mode. As these links that bound the modernist idea of community to its power base come apart, tactical practices proliferate because the community has difficulty defining its boundaries against the external environment, the environment of the Other. As the boundaries blur around the idea of community and tactics of difference and Otherness threaten the power base defined by strategic consensus, those who participated in the dominant consensus seek to re-establish their boundaries against the exterior. The community seeks to re-establish its consensus and protect itself against threats from the outside—to regain the harmony which was promised at its origins. Myths of

origin can provide a basis for the community to translate this tension with the external Other into a desire for purification—reestablishing the community's boundaries against the external.

In our efforts to recuperate the idea of community as a place where we share values and assumptions, we may think we are creating a place where all people will come to share these values with us, but we may instead be creating a place where any one of us could be identified as the Other. The question is do we see ourselves in *them* and can *they* become *us* in the modernist mode? Or can *we* become *them* and will *they* always remain outside the community in postmodern terms? A dilemma lies at the heart of the idea of community: tensions between modernism and postmodernism create promises, threats, and paradoxes. The modernist promise of inclusion is met by the threat of consensual coercion and communal terrorism. The postmodernist promise of accommodation of difference is met by the threat of permanent marginalization, exile, and the terrors of objectification. In these times when the modern and postmodern coexist in the same spaces, the idea of community is more of a minefield than a place of harmony.

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